Celebrating Animals | Confronting Cruelty

THE HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES

March 6, 2017

Environment Committee
Legislative Office Building, Room 3200
Hartford, CT 06106
Phone: 860-240-0440
envtestimony@cga.ct.gov

Re: **OPPOSE SB 522**, AN ACT AUTHORIZING BEAR HUNTING IN CONNECTICUT

Dear Co-Chair Kennedy, Co-Chair Miner, Co-Chair Demicco, Vice Chair Flexer, Vice Chair Gresko, Vice Chair Somers, Ranking Member Harding, and Honorable Members of the Environment Committee,

On behalf of the Connecticut-based supporters of The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), the largest animal protection organization in the country, please accept this public hearing testimony in OPPOSITION to SB 522.

While some may be keen to commence a black bear hunting season in Connecticut ostensibly to reduce human-bear conflicts, the best available science is clear that hunting will not help alleviate human-bear conflicts. Further, due to slow reproduction, bear populations are highly susceptible to overharvest, which should inform this Committee's decision to not allow bear hunting in Connecticut.

In 2015, Florida and New Jersey allowed bear hunting. During these hunts, cubs were killed and trophy hunters killed more bears than the established quotas. Now, both states are considering a ban on bear hunting on the heels of these hunts. With Connecticut's estimated population of only 700 bears (per DEEP's February 2017 estimate), a similar hunting frenzy could jeopardize the future existence of bears in Connecticut.

Please consider the following:

Bears, a long-lived and slow-to-reproduce species, are highly susceptible to overharvest.
Because of persecution and habitat loss, bears disappeared from much of New England, and are now just making a comeback. Understanding bear biology and educating the public about how to coexist with bears is the key to ensuring that bears survive for future generations to enjoy.

DEEP has estimated Connecticut's current bear population at around 700 black bears. Proponents of bear hunting are making the claim that the bear population will double every five years, but this cannot be true.

Unlike rabbits, black bears do not reproduce quickly. (In order to push through a 2015 bear hunting season, New Jersey state officials made the even more absurd claim that the NJ bear population would double every year.)

Black bear females do not reach breeding age until they are between 4 and 6 years old. In each litter, a mother bear will give birth to an average of 2 or 3 cubs, but bears have extended intervals between litters. A mother will have a litter only about every 2 to 3 years. Not all her cubs survive, either. Pregnancies are also impacted by the phenomenon of "delayed implantation," nature's way of limiting population growth when food is scarce.

Bears mate in spring and early summer. After mating, the fertilized egg stops its development as a blastocyst. If the female gains enough weight in the fall, the blastocyst will implant in the uterine wall. Cubs are born 2 months later. When food supplies are scarce, and mothers do not gain the weight, and eggs do not implant.

In addition to their slow reproduction potential, bears populations are limited by habitat and food availability, and in nature, by deadly strife between members. Adult male bears frequently kill other bears.

Science clearly demonstrates that bear hunting does not address human-bear conflicts or make people safer. Wildlife agencies and policymakers often claim that bear hunting to reduce their numbers in the forest will result in fewer of them expanding into urban areas where they may cause problems.[i] However, studies show that bear hunting will only reduce conflicts in cases where the bear population is reduced below sustainable levels.[ii]

Eight scientific studies examined whether hunting would also result in fewer human-bear conflicts, and researchers found no evidence of a connected relationship. Obbard et al. (2014) wrote: "We found no significant correlations between harvest and subsequent HBC [human-bear conflicts]. Although it may be intuitive to assume that harvesting more bears should reduce HBC [human-bear conflicts], empirical support for this assumption is lacking despite considerable research (Garshelis 1989, Treves and Karanth 2003, Huygens et al. 2004, Tavss 2005, Treves 2009, Howe et al. 2010, Treves et al. 2010)."[iii]

Hunting doesn't reduce conflicts because trophy hunters generally remove non-problem bears from the population; that is, the individuals not involved in nuisance behaviors.[iv] Instead, hunters target large bears far from human habitation, in an attempt to acquire what they perceive to be an impressive trophy.

Human-bear conflicts are caused by food availability, not the number of bears in the woods. Scientists correlate human-bear conflicts with a lack of available natural bear foods. When there is less natural food available—because of food failures from weather events like drought or unseasonable frosts—bears are more inclined to come into human-dominated habitats where they may seek out unsecured garbage and other food sources.[v]

Hunting bears does not increase social tolerance for bears. Wildlife managers frequently claim that hunting bears will increase social tolerance for them, but empirical study proves this claim as false.[vi]

How to effectively alleviate human-bear conflicts. Community-based education programs that emphasize the benefits of black bears,[vii] combined with aversive conditioning or "hazing" programs and stringent law enforcement, are effective means of reducing human-bear conflicts.[viii] Yosemite Park recently

reported a 92% decrease in conflicts by educating the public and by enforcing special codes concerning humans and bears.[x]

Public education should include removal of attractants (e.g., accessible garbage, pet food left outdoors, certain bird feeders) and teaching people what to do when encountering a bear, namely: Stop (do not run), make yourself big by raising your arms above your head and making noise, and back away slowly.

Bears are shy animals who avoid people when possible. When systematically frightened, bears not only stay away, they teach their offspring to avoid humans as well.

Better ways for DEEP to manage human-bear conflicts. The Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) should focus on humane, effective, science-based methods to address human-bear conflicts instead of their current methods, which seem to utilize lethal responses as a first resort option all too often; this management strategy is not aligned with public sensibilities.

For example, in 2015, there were 3 high profile killings by DEEP that drew a deluge of protests. Three bears were killed after two young bears, one in Granby (May 2015) and one in Burlington (Sept 2015), frightened hikers. In these situations, DEEP did not seem to properly interpret that the bears' behavior was that of curious young bears, and that these bears would have posed no threat to the hikers. Further, the 2 bears killed in Burlington were a mother and cub, even though no mother bear was involved with the Burlington hiker. Notwithstanding the fact that the bears' behavior appeared not to be aggressive according to reports, DEEP killed the bears without knowing whether they caught the bears for whom they were searching.

When The HSUS met with DEEP on August 3, 2015 to discuss the seemingly tragic killing of the Granby bear, we started off the discussion by asking the Commissioner and several DEEP Directors to define "aggressive behavior" in a bear. When no one at DEEP could provide a definition of what constitutes "aggressive behavior," we offered to work with DEEP to provide a definition, and they declined our help. We also offered to fund signage at all state parks to tell people what to do if they encounter a bear, and they declined our offer to pay for this, and instead they put up a few signs in a few parks, months later. This public-private partnership was a missed opportunity to save taxpayers' dollars and could have resulted in a public education effort that might have prevented the killings of the Burlington bears.

DEEP claims to utilize aversive conditioning with "problem bears," but DEEP does not seem to implement aversive conditioning properly. As described by DEEP during at least four educational talks given in the past year by DEEP staff or proxies, what DEEP does is capture the bear in a culvert trap (a large metal cylinder) and then frightens the bear in that trap by hitting the outside of the container to make noise. When the bear is released, DEEP shoots the bear with rubber bullets as the bear runs away. This protocol is obviously flawed: As common sense would dictate, all this does is condition the bear to fear culvert traps.

For aversive conditioning to be done properly, it needs to be done when the problematic behavior is occurring so that the bear associates the problematic behavior with the negative stimulus, e.g., hazing the bear precisely when that bear is rummaging through a garbage can. This means that what is indicated is training of first responders, usually local law enforcement, to administer the aversive conditioning, as they are far more likely to catch the bear in the act that needs conditioning.

DEEP appears to be favoring lethal means to address conflicts over implementation of tried and tested non-lethal measures (public education, aversive conditioning) And DEEP appears to be justifying a bear trophy hunting season due to an increase in bear conflicts. Indeed, DEEP is now giving "bear talks" around the state that seem to be a promotion of their bear hunting agenda. These presentations are given by DEEP staff or proxies, and are seeded with fear-mongering propaganda. For example, in the most recent bear talk in Woodbury (Feb. 4, 2017), ex-DEEP Director of Wildlife Dale May showed a PowerPoint image of two dead sheep and made the emotionally charged comment: "Sometimes bears kill sheep. They may eat them, but sometimes they kill them just because they like killing." In another area of the presentation, he showed close-up images of a bear's canine teeth, describing the "damage they could probably do to a human" – which seemed to be an attempt to incite fear in the audience. Notably, he failed to mention that no one in recorded history in our state has been killed by a black bear, and that attacks anywhere are exceedingly rare events, even when taking into consideration DEEP's predisposition to misidentify benign encounters, as was seen in Granby and Burlington: in both cases, the young bears' curious actions were mischaracterized as "attacks," and the bears' behavior was initially mischaracterized as "bold and aggressive." (After intense public pressure for these killings, DEEP's language escalated to "predatory and aggressive.") The goal of these "bear talks" seems to be to foster an irrational fear of bears in order to more easily sell trophy hunting as a method to reduce human-bear conflicts.

Wildlife agencies and policymakers should stop misleading the public. Suggesting that bear hunting will alleviate conflicts between people and bears is not substantiated by the best available science. Rather than bowing to a minority of vocal trophy hunters, wildlife agencies and policymakers should implement proven conflict-prevention techniques. These proven, scientifically-tested methods have broad public support and benefit both people and bears.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours truly,

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[i] Hank Hristienko and Jr. McDonald, John E., "Going in the 21st Century: A Perspective on Trends and Controversies in the Management of the Black Bear " *Ursus* 18, no. 1 (2007); A. Treves, K. J. Kapp, and D. M. MacFarland, "American Black Bear Nuisance Complaints and Hunter Take," *Ursus* 21, no. 1 (2010).

[ii] M. E. Obbard et al., "Relationships among Food Availability, Harvest, and Human-Bear Conflict at Landscape Scales in Ontario, Canada," *Ursus* 25, no. 2 (2014); E. J. Howe et al., "Do Public Complaints Reflect Trends in Human-Bear Conflict?" *Ursus* 21, no. 2 (2010).

[iii] Obbard et al., Relationships among Food Availability, Harvest, and Human-Bear Conflict at Landscape Scales in Ontario, Canada."

[iv] Treves et al., "American Black Bear Nuisance Complaints and Hunter Take." Hristienko and McDonald, "Going in the 21st Century: A Perspective on Trends and Controversies in the Management of the Black Bear. "

[v] Treves et al., "American Black Bear Nuisance Complaints and Hunter Take; Obbard et al., "Relationships among Food Availability, Harvest, and Human-Bear Conflict at Landscape Scales in Ontario, Canada"; E. J. Howe et al., "Do

Public Complaints Reflect Trends in Human-Bear Conflict?"; S. Baruch-Mordo et al., "Stochasticity in Natural Forage Production Affects Use of Urban Areas by Black Bears: Implications to Management of Human-Bear Conflicts," *Plos One* 9, no. 1 (2014).

[vi] Adrian Treves, "Hunting for Large Carnivore Conservation," *Journal of Applied Ecology* 46, (2009).

[vii] K. Slagle et al., "Building Tolerance for Bears: A Communications Experiment," *Journal of Wildlife Management* 77, no. 4 (2013). For studies discusnsidiusing black bears' benefits, *see e.g.*, M. S. Enders and S. B. Vander Wall, "Black Bears Ursus Americanus Are Effective Seed Dispersers, with a Little Help from Their Friends," *Oikos* 121, no. 4 (2012); K. Takahashi and K. Takahashi, "Spatial Distribution and Size of Small Canopy Gaps Created by Japanese Black Bears: Estimating Gap Size Using Dropped Branch Measurements," *Bmc Ecology* 13, (2013); T. E. Reimchen and C. H. Fox, "Fine-Scale Spatiotemporal Influences of Salmon on Growth and Nitrogen Signatures of Sitka Spruce Tree Rings," *Bmc Ecology* 13, (2013).

[viii] L. Masterson, *Living with Bears: A Practical Guide to Bear Country* (Masonville: PixyJack Press, LLC, 2006); Mazur, R. L. "Does Aversive Conditioning Reduce Human-Black Bear Conflict?" *Journal of Wildlife Management* 74, no. 1 (2010): 48-54.

[ix] Yosemite National Park officials reported a 92 percent drop off in human-bear conflicts as a result of public education campaigns and law enforcement practices. Paul Rogers, 2014 "Conflicts with Yosemite bears fall dramatically as people, bears learn new lessons." http://www.mercurynews.com/science/ci_26529196/conflicts-yosemite-bears-fall-dramatically-people-bears-learn